

CHAPTER ONE

Old Stone was the only one who saw what happened that day. He was up on his favorite ledge, dozing. He liked being there by himself, away from the rest of the herd. He liked how the early morning sunshine felt on his fur. It warmed his aching bones; it soothed his broken horn. But mostly he liked watching the sparkling white glacier bending away down the steep canyon. When he listened closely, he could hear the ice moaning deep down inside of itself. That sound was the closest thing to music that the beast had ever known - the lulling, motherly voice of the mountains.

Old Stone was enjoying all of these little pleasures when he spied the tiny figure coming up the moraine.

“Hrumph!” he grumbled. “What a nuisance.”

Of course, it was not so unusual to see humans in the massif. Over the years, the old buck had seen his share. But he had never seen one moving so swiftly, with such confidence and skill. And to his recollection, he had never seen a man alone.

In spite of the annoyance, Old Stone found himself curious. He watched the lone hiker travel through the boulder field, and then scramble over the snowy bergschrund to the base of the tallest spire.

The old ibex chuckled to himself.

Although many had tried, no human had ever climbed to the top of that looming needle of granite. They always had to back off. *Always*. It amused Old Stone that here was yet another person to give it a try.

But then the man made a gesture that caused Old Stone to take notice. Gently, almost like a prayer, he placed both hands, palms flat, against the rock. And then he bowed his head.

Old Stone leaned forward, unsure of what he was seeing. It seemed that maybe - Could it be possible? - the man was listening to the voice of the mountains. He was hearing the music. Old Stone had never thought humans capable of anything but silliness. They were always yodeling and hopping around on the rocks like a bunch of clumsy, two-legged rabbits. They certainly didn't seem to belong in the high mountains. But this fellow here, he was different somehow. Old Stone felt that it was true. This solitary man seemed to be a natural part of the alpine world. He seemed akin to the noble ibex.

Old Stone couldn't help himself; he suddenly liked this man.

Tipping his face to the sky, the man peered all the long way to the top of the spire. He reached up and curled his fingers around a knob of stone. He jammed his boot toe into a crack. And then, with a mighty upward heave, he began to climb.

Up and up he moved, a tiny soul scaling that immense granite wall toward the blue heavens.

Old Stone never took his eyes off the man all afternoon.

The sun crept overhead, raking over the peaks and casting shadows across the glacier. The air grew cold.

And still, the man climbed upward, tirelessly upward.

After many hours, the ibex thought to himself, My goodness! He's going to make it!

Old Stone was surprised to find himself growing nervous for the man, as if he cared one wit for what humans did with their lives. He thought, I'm going to see the first person climb it all the way to the top.

But then the man stopped. Something had blocked his way.

Stiffly, Old Stone stood, squinting across the chill space.

The alpinist had reached the most difficult part of the route - an overhanging roof of stone. He leaned out from the rock, reaching up and feeling for something secure to hold onto. Then he pressed back tight against the wall, hanging on with one hand, while opening and closing his other hand into a fist.

“Come on,” whispered the ibex. “You can do it.”

After a short rest, the climber leaned out again, his back arched, an arm stretching out to clutch at the rock above his head. He took hold with one hand - two hands - and then, delicately, he let his boots come away from the wall.

Old Stone gulped.

The man hung with nothing but the yawning space of air between himself and the boulders far below. He swung back and forth, back and forth, like a rag blowing in a light breeze.

For a time, everything stopped.

Even the music.

The whole world held its breath.

“Come on, Friend,” whispered Old Stone. “Find your way.”

The man seemed to be thinking. He appeared to be considering all the choices before him.

“Find your way.” The old ibex was almost pleading. “Please find your way.”

The man laughed once - Ha! - and then said something in a language Old Stone didn't know.

His small, human voice echoed in the vast wilderness.

It caused the hairs to rise on Old Stone's neck.

The alpinist held on for a while longer.

But then he did the most horrible thing imaginable.

He fell.

